

## TRANSLATING THE POWER OF COVERDELL FELLOWS TO ADDRESS GLOBAL NURSING CHALLENGES

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The global shortage of Registered Nurses (RNs) due to an aging nursing workforce has been well-documented (International Council of Nurses, 2013; National Council of State Boards of Nursing, 2018). This shortage of professional RNs poses a significant threat to patient safety as well as places limitations on the growth of the profession. In order to combat this shortage, the development of alternative academic pathways into nursing is imperative. Academic opportunities to enter undergraduate nursing should include access for mature, experienced professionals who are prepared to care for an ever more diverse patient population and who can provide nursing expertise in the global arena. Not surprisingly, the nursing profession has identified global healthcare as a core competency required for clinical nursing practice. One pathway which marries an alternative academic background with global situational awareness is the Coverdell Fellowship. This Fellowship, named after Senator Paul D. Coverdell, the US director of the Peace Corps from 1989 to 1991, is designed to reward previous Peace Corps experience in order to gain funding for graduate school.

The establishment of the Peace Corps by President John F. Kennedy in 1961 was designed to build international friendships and to enhance world peace. Over the last 55 years the Peace Corps has made a significant contribution in developing an increased global awareness which has improved the lives of others by offering transformational experiences in potentially remote and rural areas all over the world. Feldman (2013) reports a total of 215,000 Peace Corps members have taken part in International projects in 139 countries. Typically, the Peace Corps requires a voluntary time commitment of 27 months. The first three-month experience usually focuses on both cultural and geographic acclimatization. Following the initial induction period, volunteers commence their 2-year commitment in their assigned geographical location. These locations can be either in rural or urban environments, giving volunteers the opportunity to work alongside people from the local culture and to collaborate on diverse projects such as education, health, and forestry and agriculture. An additional opportunity to capture similar candidates is the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps (EVHAC) which was adapted from the Peace Corps model.

The Coverdell Fellowships in nursing are designed to actively support Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCV) in developing nursing skills in such a way that supports the local community. Coverdell Fellows already have the skills and abilities enabling them to communicate with sensitivity and to develop therapeutic relationships with diverse global populations. Coverdell Fellows will have a bachelor's degree and will have demonstrated the organizational, academic, cultural, and technical skills to make a successful transition into the professional nursing workforce. It is possible for the international nursing profession to capitalize on the talents and global expertise of Coverdell Fellows to assist in learning how to achieve more with less, and thereby help fill the void of the nursing shortage. These lessons can help registered baccalaureate-prepared nurses in preparation in cultural awareness and global or international health to meet the complex health care needs of the diverse populations.

The first Paul D. Coverdell Fellowship program was established at Johns Hopkins University in 1991. Since that time more than 500 RPCVs have leveraged their Peace Corps experience into the nursing profession. Currently, there are only 11 Colleges of Nursing in the US which have an established Coverdell Fellowship Program. In order to establish the Coverdell

Fellowship Program, Colleges of Nursing must first address financial feasibility and sustainability as the Peace Corps does not offer any funding to support Coverdell Fellowships. However, Coverdell Fellows who become student nurses have much to offer: international experience in a variety of fields, the ability to adapt to new cultures and environments, and demonstrated motivation and an eagerness to learn.

Successful assimilation within the College of Nursing at the University of South Florida is grounded with an intensive student orientation into the ethics, professional expectations, and legal aspects of the nursing profession. It must provide professional development opportunities; and it must offer financial and administrative support. Before embarking on the Coverdell Fellowship, the USF College of Nursing ensured adequate resources were available in order to provide Fellows with the internships and clinical practicum experience required. RPCVs will be able to access a wide range of community outreach projects which could be anything from working with social community agencies to working with healthcare providers who deliver care to the undocumented migrant population. Internationally, the USF College of Nursing currently has affiliation agreements with 12 local/regional acute care hospitals, several community agencies, and four global clinical sites (Panama, St. Croix, Scotland, and England) which all provide the necessary nursing clinical practicum experiences. In addition, many area hospital affiliates offer specialized internships and training programs to support Coverdell Fellows following graduation. The USF College of Nursing's programs are run on a 12 month calendar year, making graduation from the accelerated second-degree in nursing achievable within 16 months. Lastly, the USF Coverdell Fellowship Program provides substantial tuition assistance for all accepted Fellows, thus minimizing any financial burden.

Many Colleges of Nursing are currently faced with the challenge of providing students with opportunities which will allow them to become more globally aware and culturally competent. Thus, working with the Peace Corps, a highly respected organization with longstanding international experience, is an obvious step not only to bolster the nursing workforce, but also to develop a more globally sensitive and competent nursing workforce in the U.S. and abroad.

## References

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